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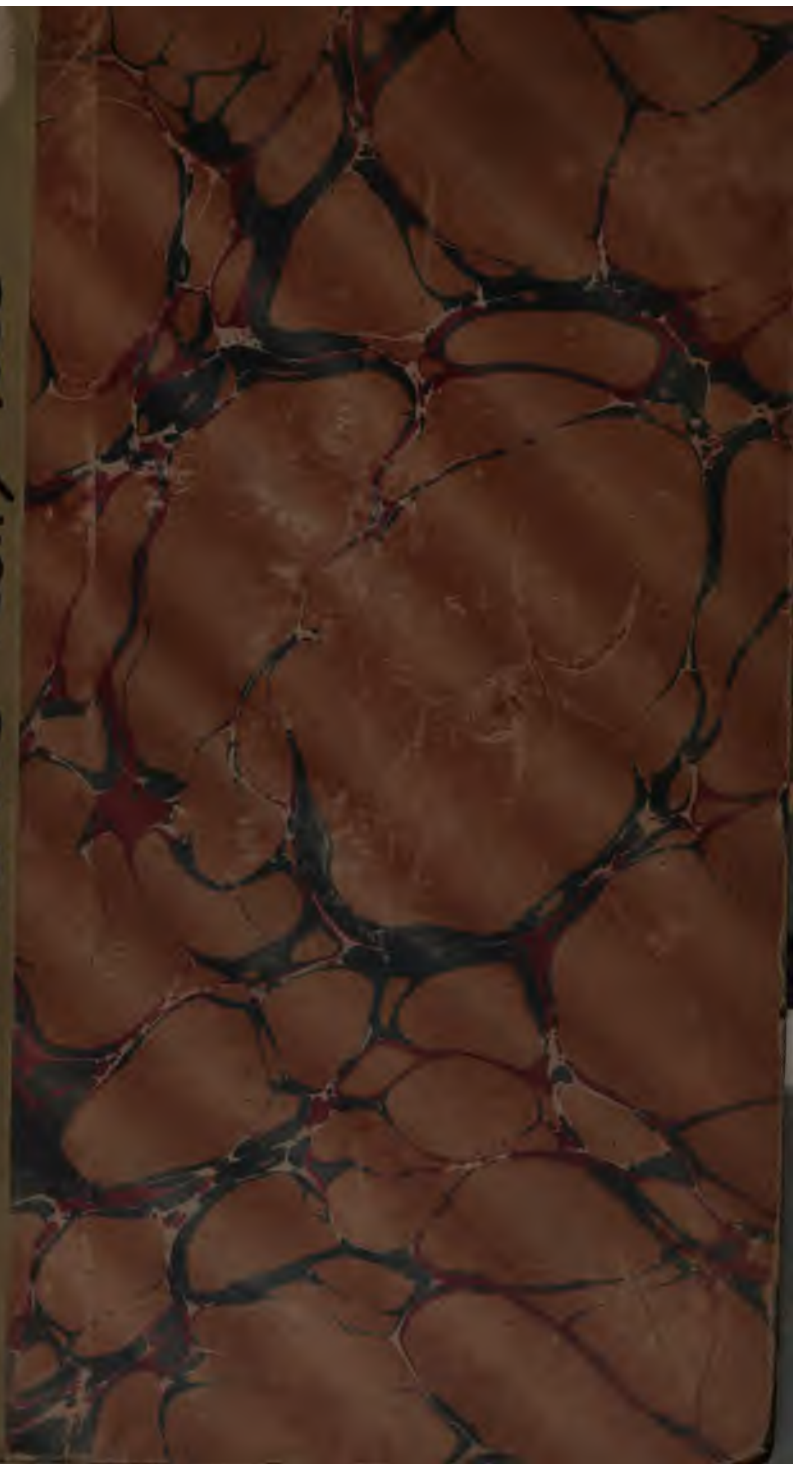
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Wordsworth's Poetry: 1905

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Poet Lore Brochures

Sound and Motion in
Wordsworth's Poetry

BY
MAY TOMLINSON



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THE RETREAT OF A POET NATURALIST
(John Burroughs)
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SOUND AND MOTION IN WORDSWORTH'S POETRY

A CAREFUL reading of English poetry will reveal the fact that the sense of the beauty of sound and motion is more largely developed in the poets—with, perhaps, two or three exceptions—than is the sense of the beauty of form and color. We read of sunshine and shadow, of the gleam, the glow, the sheen; but we find comparatively little mention of color. Indeed, the poets themselves seem to place the latter sense on a lower plane of estimation. Wordsworth, in his autobiographical poem, tells us that he was never “bent over much on superficial things, pampering myself with meagre novelities of form and color.” And yet Ruskin declares that “of all God’s gifts to the sight of man, color is the holiest, the most divine, the most solemn.” It is the painter, we must remember, to whom the beauty of color seems the highest beauty. To the musician, the deepest pleasure is the pleasure that he re-

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ceives through the ear. Color is naught to him except as it is represented in intensity of sound, in crescendo and diminuendo, in a delicate shading of tone. And the poet, in his susceptibilities, is more akin to the musician than to the painter.

The painter's interest is in objects, his aim is to reproduce; so, necessarily, he is concerned with form and color. The poet's art, more than that of the painter,—more than that of the musician, even,—is suggestive: it makes larger demands upon the imagination. And so, because, among the arts, poetry, both in him who creates and in him who merely enjoys, demands the largest exercise of the imagination, it is the most "effective agency for cherishing within us the ideal." "Its great function," says one who is great and good, "is to keep alive man's sensibilities and instincts, and thus fit him for the reception of high spiritual truths."

I have said that the poet's first delight is in sound and motion. Passages innumerable, from many poets, might be cited as illustrative of this sensitiveness. There is Coleridge's

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"Kubla Khan," with its seething turmoil and mazy motion. The poem is itself a strange wierd melody. Shelley's description in "The Revolt of Islam" of "an eagle and a serpent wreathed in fight" affords a remarkable example of life and power, of dizzy speed and impetuous flight, of wheeling, floating, fluttering, leaping motion. Tennyson's reminiscence, in "The Gardener's Daughter," of a certain May morning with all its sound is proof enough of his delight in melody. We know what joy even the memory of the thrush's song gave Browning, when, far from home, he thought of England in May time, when "the white-throat builds and all the swallows!" Every student knows the morning and evening sounds as enumerated by Milton in those companion poems, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso." Mrs. Browning's poetry is fairly vibrant with sound. I have in mind as I write some very beautiful lines in "The Drama of Exile," suggestive of smooth-flowing motion and soft, low sounds.

But, of all the poets, Wordsworth, in his enjoyment of nature, is most alive to the pow-

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er and beauty of sound. When a boy, he would walk alone under the quiet stars, and, at such times, he felt "whate'er there is of power in sound to breathe an elevated mood, by form or image unprofaned." "And I would stand," he tells us, "if the night blackened with a coming storm, beneath some rock, listening to notes that are the ghostly language of the ancient earth, or make their abode in distant winds." Of this boyhood time we read,

"Ah! when I have hung
Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill sustained, and almost (so it seemed)
Suspended by the blast that blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry
wind
Blow through my ear! the sky seemed not a
sky
Of earth—and with what motion moved the
clouds!"

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Wordsworth always heard voices : the voice of the mountain torrent, the tones of waterfalls, the murmur of the streams, the sighing of the wind through the leaves of a tree, the soft murmur of the vagrant bee.*

The number of poems in which we fail to find some mention of waters—of sea or lake, of river or brook, of mountain torrent or waterfall—is not large. Indeed, by actual count, among the whole number of Wordsworth's poems, there are scarcely thirty which have not some reference to sound or motion : sound or flow of waters, song or flight of bird, or the movement of clouds. Wordsworth described with rare truthfulness what he saw and heard. A daily wanderer among woods and fields, familiar with mountains and lakes and sounding cataracts, it is not strange that he should report of smooth fields; of white

*All through my paper I have woven into my sentences phrases and clauses, which the student of Wordsworth's poetry will recognize as quotations. I have not thought it necessary, in these instances, to use the marks of quotation.

M. T.

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sheets of water; of the cuckoo's melancholy call; of the trembling lake; of motions of delight that haunt the sides of the green hills; of breezes and soft airs; of mists and winds that dwell among the hills; of notes which, in his tuneful course, the wind draws forth from rocks, woods, caverns, heaths, and crashing shores.

The following description of "The Simplon Pass" is one of the finest of Wordsworth's *sound* poems:

—“Brook and road
Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy Pass,
And with them did we journey several hours
At a slow pace. The immeasurable height
Of woods, decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And in the narrow rent, at every turn,
Winds thwarting winds bewildered and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side

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As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and regions of the
 heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the
 light—
Were all like workings of one mind, the fea-
 tures
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without
 end.”

Another instance of the poet's alertness to the voices of nature is the passage in the fifth book of “The Prelude,” beginning, “There was a boy.” The famous description of winter sports—

“All shod with steel
We hissed along the polished ice”—

affords a good illustration of Wordsworth's delight in both sound and motion.

No lovelier example of Wordsworth's

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sense of the beauty of motion, as an expression of grace and gentleness, could be given than the lines which tell of the white Doe's weekly visit to Bolton Priory during the hour of service. The passage is perfect;—in diction, in imagery, in versification :

“The only voice which you can hear
Is the river murmuring near.
—When soft!—the dusky trees between,
And down the path through the open green,
Where is no living thing to be seen;
And through yon gateway, where is found,
Beneath the arch with ivy bound,
Free entrance to the churchyard ground—
Comes gliding in with lovely gleam,
Comes gliding in serene and slow,
Soft and silent as a dream,
A solitary Doe!
White she is as lily of June,
And beauteous as the silver moon
When out of sight the clouds are driven
And she is left alone in heaven;
Or like a ship some gentle day
In sunshine sailing far away,

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A glittering ship, that hath the plain
Of ocean for her own domain."

Is there not something more than romantic fancy in the thought that Nature hath power to mould even the bodily form of one, who, from earliest childhood, lives in close sympathy with her,—in her daily presence? And shall not "beauty born of murmuring sound" pass into the face of the maiden who leans "her ear to many a secret place where rivulets dance their wayward round?" What could be more beautiful than the following exquisite stanzas from that most Wordsworthian poem, "Three years she Grew?"—

"The floating clouds their state shall lend
To her; for her the willow bend;
Nor shall she fail to see
Even in the motions of the storm
Grace that shall mould the maiden's form
By silent sympathy.

"The stars of midnight shall be dear
To her; and she shall lean her ear

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To many a secret place
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face."

Reference has already been made to the power possessed by the family of floods over the minds of poets, old and young. Our poet finds a friend in every babbling brook; "he loves the brooks far better than the sage's books." "Fondly I pursued," he tells us, "even when a child, the streams, unheard, unseen."

"They taught me random cares and truant
joys,
That shield from mischief and preserve from
stains
Vague minds, while men are growing out of
boys."

"The Derwent, fairest of all rivers, loved to
Blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,
And, from his alder shades and rocky falls,
And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
That flowed along my dreams."

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Certain rivers will always be associated with the name of Wordsworth. Everybody knows those sweetest and tenderest of poems, the three poems to the River Yarrow,—

“Yarrow Stream!

To dream-light dear while yet unseen,
Dear to the common sunshine,
And dearer still, as now I feel,
To memory's shadowy moonshine.”

The sonnets to The River Duddon, though little known, are, indeed, refreshing when read on a summer day. They suggest what is cool, and sweet, and restful: you feel soft breezes; you hear glad bird-notes; you smell the delicate scent of wild flowers; you rejoice in green bowers and quivering sunbeams; you follow the smooth, glistening River “through dwarf willows gliding and by ferny brake; you linger under the shade of green alders and silver birch-trees. As you advance with the majestic Duddon, in its “radiant progress toward the Deep,” you feel your heart joining in the Poet's prayer that you may be

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“Prepared, in peace of heart, in calm of mind
And soul, to mingle with Eternity;”

you find your spirit attuned to the noble dignity of the concluding sonnet of the series:—

“I thought of Thee, my partner and my guide,
As being past away.—Vain sympathies!
For, backward, Duddon, as I cast my eyes,
I see what was, and is, and will abide;
Still glides the Stream, and shall forever
glide;

The Form remains; the Function never dies;
While we, the brave, the mighty, and the
wise,

We Men, who in our morn of youth defied
The elements, must vanish;—be it so!
Enough, if something from our hands have
power

To live, and act, and serve the future hour;
And if, as toward the silent tomb we go,
Through love, through hope, and faith’s
transcendent dower,

We feel that we are greater than we know.”

Matthew Arnold, in his “Memorial
verses,” says,—

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"Keep fresh the grass upon his grave,
O Rotha, with thy living wave!
Sing him thy best! for few or none
Hears thy voice right now he is gone."

Wordsworth repeatedly uses the figure of the stream, or brook, or lake. In the introductory sonnet to "Ecclesiastical Sonnets," he likens the Christian church to a Holy River, and follows the course of this Stream from its source, marking its progress through the centuries, until, in the closing sonnet of the series, he exclaims,—

"Look forth!—that Stream behold,
That Stream upon whose bosom we have
passed

Floating at ease while nations have effaced
Nations, and Death has gathered to his fold
Long lines of mighty kings—look forth my
Soul!

(Nor in this vision be thou slow to trust)
The living waters, less and less by guilt
Stained and polluted, brighten as they roll,
Till they have reached the eternal city—built
For the perfected Spirits of the just!"

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In "The Prelude," the poet tells how, in that time of depression and bewilderment which followed the failure of the French Revolution, his beloved sister maintained for him a saving intercourse with his true self,—

"Now speaking in a voice
Of sudden admonition—like a brook
That did but *cross* a lonely road, and now
Is seen, heard, felt, and caught at every turn,
Companion never lost through many a
league."

In "The Excursion" the Solitary thus describes the grief of his young wife:

"Calm as a frozen lake when ruthless winds
Blow fiercely, agitating earth and sky,
The Mother now remained."

We find the same figure in the poem entitled "Memory." The serenity of old age, when the life has been pure and the conscience is clear, is compared to the calm of

—"lakes that sleep
In frosty moonlight glistening,
Or mountain rivers, where they creep

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Along a channel smooth and deep,
To their own far-off murmurs listening."

The very melody of these verses, so smooth and flowing, suggests the calm that they describe. In his poem "To The Skylark," Wordsworth likens the ecstatic outpouring of the bird's song to the strong, free, impetuous flow of a mountain river:—

"With a soul as strong as a mountain river
Pouring out praise to the Almighty Giver."

No poets observed more closely the movements of the clouds—the *speechless* clouds. In "The Excursion," speaking of that little lowly vale,—

"A lowly vale, and yet uplifted high
Among the mountains,"—

the poet says,—

"in such a place
I would not willingly, methinks, lose sight
Of a departing cloud."

Two remarkable instances of the figurative use of the cloud should be noted. The first is that familiar simile,—

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“I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high or vales and hills.”

The other is the famous description of the
Leech Gatherer, old and decrepit:—

“Upon the margin of that moorish flood
Motionless as a cloud the old man stood,
That heareth not the loud winds when they
call
And moveth altogether, if it move at all.”

Many are the birds celebrated in Wordsworth’s verse,—birds of all degrees, from the daring hawk to the lordly eagle, from the

—“darkling wren
That tunes on Duddons banks her slender
voice”—

to the soaring lark,

“Ethereal minstrel! pilgrim of the sky!”

But our poet rejoices most in the cuckoo’s
vagrant voice:

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“Not the whole warbling grove in concert
heard,
When sunshine follows shower, the heart can
thrill
Like the first summon's, Cuckoo! of thy bill,
With its twin notes inseparately paired.”

The poet tells us with what delight he
heard that voice in a foreign land:

“List—’twas the cuckoo—O with what de-
light
Heard I that voice! and catch it now though
faint,
Far off and faint, and melting into air,
Yet not to be mistaken. Hark again!
Those louder cries give notice that the Bird,
Although as invisible as Echo's self,
Is wheeling hitherward. Thanks, happy crea-
ture,
For this unthought-of greeting!”

No poet has so well described that *wander-
ing Voice*:

“Though babbling only to the Vale,

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Of sunshine and flowers,
Thou bringest unto me a tale
Of visionary hours.

“Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring!
Even yet thou art to me
No bird, but an invisible thing,
A voice, a mystery;

“The same whom in my school-boy days
I listened to; that boy
Which made me look a thousand ways
In bush, and tree, and sky.

“To seek thee did I often rove
Through woods and on the green;
And thou wert still a hope, a love;
Still longed for, never seen.

“And I can listen to thee yet;
Can lie upon the plain
And listen, till I do beget
That golden time again.

“O blessed Bird! the earth we pace
Again appears to be

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An unsubstantial fairy place,
That is fit home for Thee."

Way into manhood the poet remembered the song of the little wren which one day, in his school-boy time, sang so sweetly in the nave of the old church :

"So sweetly mid the gloom the invisible bird
Sang to herself, that there I could have made
My dwelling-place, and lived forever there
To hear such music."

Among the bird verses there is nothing more exquisite than the following stanzas describing the Green Linnet :

"Amid yon tuft of hazel trees,
That twinkle to the gusty breeze,
Behold him perched in ecstasies,
Yet seeming still to hover ;
There ! where the flutter of his wings
Upon his back and body flings
Shadows and sunny glimmerings,
That cover him all over.

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"My dazzled sight he oft deceives,
A Brother of the dancing leaves;
Then flits, and from the cottage-eaves
Pours forth his song in gushes;
As if by that exulting strain
He mocked and treated with disdain
The voiceless Form he chose to feign
While fluttering in the bushes."

The picture of the Blue-cap is almost as full
of life and joy:

"Where is he that giddy sprite,
Blue-cap, with his colors bright,
Who was blest as bird could be,
Feeding in the apple-tree;
Made such wanton spoil and rout,
Turning blossoms inside out;
Hung—head pointing towards the ground—
Fluttered, perched, into a round
Bound himself, and then unbound;
Lithest, gaudiest Harlequin!
Prettiest tumbler ever seen!
Light of heart and light of limb;
What has now become of Him?"

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Very different from the flitting, fluttering,
tumbling of this Blue-cap in the apple-tree,
is the wide, sweeping, circling flight of the
Water Fowl in their evolutions above the
lake.

“Mark how the feathered tenants of the
flood,

With grace of motion that might scarcely
seem

Inferior to angelical, prolong

Their curious pastime! shaping in mid air

(And sometimes with ambitious wing that
soars,

High as the level of the mountain-tops)

A circuit ampler than the lake beneath—

Their own domain; but ever, while intent

On tracing and retracing that large round,

Their jubilant activity evolves

Hundreds of curves and circlets, to and fro,

Upward and downward, progress intricate

Yet unperplexed, as if one spirit swayed

Their indefatigable flight. 'Tis done—

Ten times, or more, I fancied it had ceased;

But lo! the vanished company again

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Ascending; they approach—I hear their
wings,
Faint, faint at first; and then at eager sound,
Past in a moment—and as faint again!
They tempt the sun to sport amid their
plumes;
They tempt the water, or the gleaming ice,
To show them a fair image; 'tis themselves,
Their own fair forms, upon the glimmering
plain,
Painted more soft and fair as they descend
Almost to touch;—then up again aloft,
Up, with a sally and a flash of speed,
As if they scorned both resting-place and
rest!”

Wordsworth was never

—“to the moods

Of time and season, to the moral power,
The affections and the spirit of the place
Insensible.”

Though rejoicing always before the winds
and roaring waters and in the lights and
shades that march and countermarch about
the hills in glorious apparition, he was most

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responsive to the quieting influences of nature, he felt most deeply the stillness and calm of evening and early morning. We know this when he read that incomparable sonnet, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," and the lovely sonnet beginning, "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free." Passages of great beauty (the beauty of truthfulness—the truthfulness of one who not only sees but feels) might be culled from the many poems which describe the *sober hour*, its hush, its repose, its deepening darkness. The finest of these evening voluntaries is the ode "Composed upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendor and Beauty." No lover of poetry can read this ode without emotion and an uplift of the spirit, without a vision of those *fair countries* to which we are bound.

Wordsworth, as we have said, sensitive always to the moods of time and place, felt what power there is in sound, heard at a quiet hour and in a lonely place, to deepen the sense of calm and solitude. Note his description, near the close of the fourth book of "The

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Excursion" of the raven's cry, heard at the hour when issue forth the first pale stars:

"The solitary raven, flying
Athwart the concave of the dark blue dome,
Unseen, perchance above all power of sight."
See also, in the same book of "The Excursion" what the poet says of

—"that single cry, the unanswered bleat
Of a poor lamb—left somewhere to itself,
The plaintive spirit of the solitude."

A stanza in the poem entitled "Fidelity," the stanza which describes the loneliness and remoteness of that cove far in the bosom of Helvellyn, affords another example of the power of sound to deepen the impression of stillness and solitude:

"There sometimes does a leaping fish
Send through the tarn a lonely cheer;
The crags repeat the raven's crook,
In symphony austere;
Thither the rainbow comes—the cloud—
And mists that spread the flying shroud;
And sunbeams; and the sounding blast,

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That, if it could, would hurry past;
But that enormous barrier holds it fast."

Somewhere in his poetry, Wordsworth speaks of the shadow of an object as that object's echo. Another instance of this tendency to transfer the function from the sense of seeing to the sense of hearing is found in the little poem, "Airey-place Valley." The swaying motion of the light ash—a tree sensitive to the gentle touch of the breeze—is described as a "soft eye-music of slow-waving boughs." In the second book of "The Excursion" there is still another example. The Solitary has been telling of the part that two huge Peaks play in the wild concert which the wind, in his tuneful course, draws forth from rocks, woods, caverns, heaths, and crashing shores. "Nor have nature's laws," he adds, "Left them ungifted with a power to yield Music of finer tone; a harmony, So do I call it, though it be the hand Of silence, though there be no voice;—the clouds,
The mists, the shadows, light of golden suns,

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Motions of moonlight, all come hither—
touch,
And have an answer—thither come, and shape
A language not unwelcome to sick hearts
And idle spirits.”

That Wordsworth, himself so alive to the beauty of sound, comprehended the loneliness of one who lives in utter silence, the following passage from “The Excursion” proves:

“He grew up
From year to year in loneliness of soul;
And this deep mountain-valley was to him
Soundless, with all its streams. The bird of
dawn
Did never rouse this Cottager from sleep
With startling summons, nor for his delight
The vernal cuckoo shouted; not for him
Murmured the labouring bee. When stormy
winds
Were working the broad bosom of the lake
Into a thousand, thousand sparkling waves,
Rolking the trees, or driving cloud on cloud
Along the sharp edge of yon lofty crags,

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The agitated scene before his eye
Was silent as a picture : evermore
Were all things silent, wheresoe'er he moved."

Seen anywhere, should we not know these
lines to be Wordsworth's?—
And you tall pine-tree, whose composing
sound

Was wasted on the good man's living ear,
Hath now its own peculiar scanty;
And, at the touch of every wandering breeze,
Murmurs, not idly, o'er his peaceful grave."

These lines just quoted remind us of the
poet's wish for the Farmer of Tilsbury:

"I hope that thy grave, wheresoever it be,
Will hear the wind blow through the leaves
of a tree."

We cannot read Wordsworth's poetry
thoughtfully without being made to think
what this world would be if Nature never
gave a brook to murmur or a bough to

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wave! What a desolate earth this would be
without Life, and Voice, and Motion!

Perhaps the most grateful and exalted
tribute ever paid by poet to the salutary and
composing influence of nature is found in that
passage in "The Prelude" which has been
called a prayer and anthem, a gloria in ex-
celsis:

"Yet were I grossly destitute of all
Those human sentiments that make this earth
So dear, if I should fail with grateful voice
To speak of you, ye mountains, and ye lakes
And sounding cataracts, ye mists and winds
That dwell among the hills where I was born.
If in my youth I have been pure in heart,
If, mingling with the world, I am content
With my own modest pleasures, and have
lived
With God and Nature communing, removed
From little enmities and low desires—
The gift is yours; if in these times of fear,*
This melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown,

*French Revolution.

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If, mid indifference and apathy,
And wicked exultation when good men
On every side fall off, we know not how,
To selfishness, disguised in gentle names,
Of peace and quiet and domestic love
Yet mingled not unwillingly with sneers
On visionary minds; if, in this time
Of dereliction and dismay, I yet
Despair not of our nature, but retain,
A more than Roman confidence, a faith
That fails not, in all sorrow my support,
The blessing of my life—the gift is yours,
Ye winds and sounding cataracts! 'tis yours,
Ye mountains! thine, O Nature! Thou hast
fed

My lofty speculations; and in thee,
For this uneasy heart of ours, I find
A never-failing principle of joy
And purest passion.



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